

## Little-known African bird:

# Little Brown Bustard *Eupodotis humilis*

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Un oiseau africain peu connu: l'Outarde somalienne *Eupodotis humilis*. L'Outarde somalienne *Eupodotis humilis*, espèce classée comme Quasi-Menacée, est distribuée de façon clairsemée au nord et au centre-ouest de la Somalie et à l'est de l'Éthiopie avoisinante. La taille de sa population est inconnue. L'outarde occupe les formations buissonnantes et fourrés décidus à *Acacia* et *Commiphora* de la Région Somalie-Masai, allant jusqu'aux formations herbeuses et arbustives semi-désertiques. On n'a encore décrit aucun comportement de parade nuptiale: ajouté au faible degré de dimorphisme sexuel, cela suggère que l'espèce est monogame, vivant en couples ou petits groupes familiaux durant toute l'année. Une étude phylogénétique a trouvé qu'elle forme un complexe avec l'Outarde de Rüppell *E. rueppellii* et l'Outarde de Vigors *E. vigorsii* qui jadis étaient regroupées dans le genre *Heterotetrax*. Bien que l'Outarde somalienne se trouve dans certaines 'aires protégées,' il est probable que la présence de camps de réfugiés des deux cotés de la frontière entre la Somalie et l'Éthiopie ait eu un impact négatif sur sa population à cause des effets combinés de la chasse, le défrichement pour l'agriculture, la collecte de bois de chauffe et le surpâturage.

**L**ittle Brown Bustard *Eupodotis humilis*, classified as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2000, 2004), has an uncertain population sparsely distributed solely in north and west-central Somalia and adjacent eastern Ethiopia. It is a plumpish, relatively short-legged bustard that resembles females of White-bellied Bustard *E. senegalensis* and Red-crested Bustard *E. ruficrista*, which also occur within its range, but is separated from the former by the plain brown foreneck and bright yellow legs, and from the latter by the all-white belly. The sexes are rather similar in size; males differ in having a black throat patch spotted with white and more orange-brown upperparts.

Habitats occupied by Little Brown Bustards include Somalia-Masai *Acacia-Commiphora* deciduous bushland and thicket, extending to tussocky semi-desert grassland. Like other desert-dwelling bustards, diet probably consists mainly of a range of plant material (shoots and seeds) as well as insects such as beetles and ants. Also like other bustards, the nest is on bare ground (a scrape may be formed), where a clutch of two (sometimes three) eggs is laid between April and August.

The few observations available, combined with the low degree of sexual dimorphism and lack of recorded courtship behaviour, suggest that Little Brown Bustards are monogamous, living in pairs or small family groups throughout the year. This

trait is shared with its close relatives in southern Africa, Karoo (or Vigors's) Bustard *E. vigorsii* and Rüppell's Bustard *E. rueppellii*. The observation by Giles Mulholland, on 25 December 2003, of a male throwing its head back and giving a high-pitched rattle *we-we-we*, with a female close by (Demey 2004), is analogous with descriptions by Boobyer (1989) of Vigors's Bustards defending territories that extend 55–320 ha depending on food availability, and within which birds are generally sedentary.

Thus far then, it seems we have before us a little boring bustard. Actually, the really interesting fact concerning this species is why it occurs in a small outpost in the horn of Africa, far from its relatives. According to the phylogenetic study by Pitra *et al.* (2001), Rüppell's Bustard was one of the earliest bustard species to appear during the family's rapid radiation (following separation from a common ancestor with cranes) that occurred in southern and eastern Africa some 85 MYA. *E. rueppellii* forms a complex, with Karoo and Little Brown Bustards, formerly afforded its own genus, *Heterotetrax*. Unfortunately, genetic material from the other two species was unavailable to Pitra and colleagues, so it is unclear which of the three constitutes the original form, but all of the other *c.*20 bustard species derive from another branch in bustard evolution. Meanwhile, at some point, the *Heterotetrax* group became separated, perhaps by



Figures 1–2. Male Little Brown Bustard *Eupodotis humilis*, north-west Somalia, June 2005 (John Miskell)

Outarde somalienne *Eupodotis humilis*, mâle, Somalie du nord-ouest, juin 2005 (John Miskell)

climate-related habitat change, and the ancestor of *humilis* was pushed ever further north-east; or a contiguous population within a corridor from south-west to north-east Africa became fragmented, eventually leaving a pocket population in the horn. Either way, if such trends are still in progress, then clearly the Little Brown Bustard is very vulnerable, trapped in its corner of Africa.

Little Brown Bustards occur in a number of 'protected areas' in Somalia and Ethiopia. However, the continuing presence of refugee camps on both sides of the Ethiopia–Somalia border is likely to have impacted its population through the combined effects of hunting, cultivation, firewood collection and overgrazing. The bird deserves more conservation attention than it receives at present.

## References

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